

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Marie Abigail V. Cristi for the degree of Master of Science  
in Apparel, Interiors, Housing, and Merchandising presented  
on May 5, 1995. Title: Self-Gifts: Consumer Purchases of  
Clothing Gifts for Themselves.

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Abstract approved: \_



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Little empirical research has been conducted on self-gifts as a phenomenon of consumer behavior. A review of literature demonstrated that the phenomenon of self-gifts has been studied from the conceptual aspect, such as self-gift functions. Yet, our knowledge of self-gifts still remains limited because many of the determinants of self-gifts have not been explored (occasions and motivations, self-gifts relation to self-concept, and cultural influences on self-gift behavior). The purpose of this study was to identify occasions that prompt female college students to purchase clothing as a self-gift and some of their motivations for purchasing clothing as gifts for themselves.

The data from the respondents was collected through audio-recorded interviews and were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. A purposive, non-probability sample of 19 female college students was used.

The instrument used to measure the occasions and motivations for purchasing self-gifts was the Self-Gift Thematic Apperception Test (SGTAT) developed by Mick, DeMoss,

and Faber (1992). This instrument is a specially adapted Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) based on Murstein's (1963) criteria which was derived from the original TAT developed by Murray (1938).

The respondents were shown four SGTAT stimulus pictures of drawings of a young woman standing by a counter purchasing a clothing item, with a salesperson nearby. The titles above the drawings suggested common self-gift contexts based on prior research (Mick et al., 1992; Mick & DeMoss, 1990a). The four self-gift contexts were referred to as reward, therapeutic, birthday, and nice-to-self.

Content and interpretive analysis were performed by coding the occasions and motivations in the stories that were reported by the respondents. Seventy-two usable Self-Gift Thematic Apperception Test stories were produced (18 respondents by 4 self-gift contexts).

Results of the study indicated that personal situations, which were related to significant life-transitions, work-related matters, school-related matters, and interpersonal relationship conflicts were strong occasions that prompted the purchase of self-gifts. In addition, the results of this study indicated that reward, therapeutic, and nice-to-self are common motivations for purchasing gifts for the self. These findings indicated that specific occasions and motivations for purchasing self-gifts can be identified.

**Self-Gifts: Consumer Purchases of Clothing Gifts for Themselves**

by

Marie Abigail V. Cristi

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirement for the  
degree of

Master of Science

Completed May 5, 1995  
Commencement June 1995

Master of Science thesis of Marie Abigail V. Cristi presented  
on May 5, 1995

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Cheryl Jordan for being my major professor and for all your guidance and assistance throughout my graduate program. Whenever I needed time to meet with you, you were always there. Without you, I would not have gotten where I am today.

I would also like to thank Dr. Leslie Burns for taking time out of her busy schedule to be a part of my committee and for being such an inspiration to me. All the pep-talks you gave me during our Research Group meetings motivated me tremendously. Thank you.

To Dr. Richard Mitchell, my minor professor, and Dr. Clinton Brown, my graduate council representative, thank you both for also taking time out of your busy schedules to be part of my committee. I appreciate the support and interest you both have shown for my research project.

Special thanks to Dr. Sally Francis, Mrs. Dorothy Reiley, and all the AIHM graduate students who have helped me journey through this program. I will never forget all the advice and all the help you all have given me.

Special thanks to my best friends, Clarence Palisoc, Euni Chan, and Emily Chan, who were there and supported me when I began my program. I will never forget all the times when I felt as if the whole world was against me and you all made me believe and feel as if I were the most important person alive. Although distance separates us all, you three

have been with me throughout my program and I am grateful to have you all in my life.

A thousand hugs to Alice Cacpal and Paula Varnell, my pseudo-sisters, who have been my family and have been there for me through thick and thin during these months of stress. I don't know how much to thank you both for believing in me, and for always reminding me that I would get through it. All your comforting words and hugs will never be forgotten.

Special thanks to James Okubo who, through our talks about life, made me believe that there really is light at the end of the tunnel and at the end of each rainbow, there truly is a pot of gold. And extra-special thanks to the one person who helped me get through the last few weeks of my program, including my final defense, Mark Sakaue. I could never thank you enough for all the times you were there for me. Without you there, I do not think I would have been able to keep my sanity. You have supported me, have believed in me, and have sacrificed a lot of sleep for me, and I appreciate you and all you have done for me. Thank you, Mark.

To Dad, Mom, Theresa, and Mai-Ly, there are no words to describe how much you all mean to me. The undying love and support you have given me throughout my years in school--I will forever be grateful to you all.

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# SELF-GIFTS: CONSUMER PURCHASES OF CLOTHING GIFTS FOR THEMSELVES

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

According to many social scientists, the process of gift-giving is an important part of socialization because it is through gifts that one individual is linked to another (e.g., Shwartz, 1967; Belk, 1979; Sherry, 1983). The most important component of gift-giving is probably the gift itself because it has become a symbolic form of communication, whether it be given for congratulations, love, or for obligation (Mick & DeMoss, 1990b). According to Shwartz (1967), it is the quality content of the gift which signifies the gift as a token of the social relationship.

Functions of gift-giving include social exchange, economic exchange, and socialization. Social exchange aids in establishing, defining, and maintaining interpersonal relationships after the gift exchange has been completed. It is through the exchange of gifts that social relationships are symbolized; thus linking one individual to another to ultimately complete the gift-giving process (Sherry, 1983). Economic exchange is interpreted to mean that the rewards of receiving the gift should balance with the cost of the gift. Although the term "gift" may stress that it is something voluntarily given, and that there is no expectation of compensation, it is through economic exchange where

reciprocity may be an obligation. This may due to the institutionalizing of gift-giving occasions which further enforce and reinforce the tradition of exchange (Belk, 1979). Lastly, gift-giving as a socializer deals primarily with the self-concept and behavioral patterns of an individual and is most likely to affect younger children more than adults (Belk, 1979). For instance, gifts from adults who know the child well are potentially very powerful in helping the child interpret who he or she is, as well as what he or she should be like. In addition, the selection of gifts to children may affect, not only their identities, but their formation of values regarding materialism, personal property, giving, receiving, aggression, competitiveness, education, and aesthetics. Gifts are not the sole determinants of these values, but they are powerful means of communication at ages where the child is likely to be highly suggestible (Belk, 1979).

Since Belk's discussion, several other researchers have examined the conceptual side of gift-giving (e.g., Belk & Coon, 1993; Horne & Winakor 1991; Mick & DeMoss 1990b; Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry 1989; Sherry 1983) while other researchers have applied the concept of gift-giving to academic fields such as marketing and retailing (e.g., Mick, DeMoss, & Faber, 1992).

The idea of gift-giving is not a new one, though there has been limited research on the process and the functions of gift-giving. Shwartz (1967) primarily discussed the social-

psychological aspect of the gift exchange process, and suggested that the process of gift-giving is directly connected to giving gifts to oneself.

This leads us in to the interesting area of the giving of gifts to oneself. This is normally spoken of in terms of "self-indulgence," opposition to which, stripped to its essentials, represents an unwillingness on the part of the ego to strike a bargain with the id. This inflexibility is dangerous when other people (as sources of gratification) are not available, for it makes adjustment to hostile environments unlikely. Deprived of material demonstrations of recognition from others, the internalization of such disregard can only be avoided by the utilization of oneself as a source of pleasure. The "self-gratifier" is an interesting product of the non-intimate community who, despite his pervasiveness, has received little attention from the social sciences (Shwartz, 1967, p. 3).

Shwartz (1967) concluded his discussion of gifts to oneself as nutrients for a person's emotions when he/she is without affectional ties.

Levy (1982) appears to be one of the first consumer behavior researchers to explore the possibility of gifts to oneself. He stated that:

The complexities of gift-giving and the meanings of flowers (the gift) might both be further explicated by considering personal use as a form of gift-giving to the self--"I owe it to myself." I as subject reward me as object (p. 542).

Other researchers have recognized the importance of self-gifts (e.g., Mick et al., 1992; Mick & DeMoss 1990a; Sherry 1983). Recent research findings on the underlying motivations for giving gifts to one's self and the meaning of self-gifts has expanded our knowledge of consumer behavior and has enriched the field of retailing. According to Mick

et al. (1992) giving gifts to oneself has become a prominent special indulgence in American society and should not be overlooked by retailers.

### Purpose of the Study

Little empirical research has been conducted on self-gifts as a phenomenon of consumer behavior. Specifically, are there occasions that prompt the purchase of self-gifts? Why do individuals purchase gifts for themselves? A review of literature demonstrated that the phenomenon of self-gifts has been studied from the conceptual aspect, such as self-gift functions. Yet, our knowledge of self-gifts remains limited because many of the determinants of self-gifts have not been explored (e.g., occasions and motivations, self-gifts relation to self-concept, and cultural influences on self-gift behavior). Therefore, more research is needed in order to have a better understanding of self-gifts.

The purpose of this study was to identify occasions that prompted female college students to purchase a gift for themselves and some of their motivations for purchasing a self-gift. This study was, therefore, an exploratory step toward further clarifying self-gifts.

The following research questions were answered when the study was completed:

1. What occasions prompt female college students to purchase clothing as self-gifts?

2. What are some of the motivations female college students experience in order to purchase clothing as gifts for themselves?

### College Women and Self-Gifts

According to Mick et al. (1992), women may have higher interests than men for some types of self-gifts. In addition, women may also be more open than men about revealing personal details about their self-gift behaviors. Interviewing women will enable the researcher to tap valuable insights from the responses from the sample.

Because of the many events and life transitions college students may experience, their responses will also be a valuable contribution to this study. According to Mick and DeMoss (1990a), many students related to the term "self-gifts." In their study, the term "self-gifts" was not defined for the respondents, but many of the students in their sample were able to associate the concept to their life experiences which revealed informative descriptions about their self-gift behaviors.

During their years in college, individuals tend to search for an identity, not so much of who one is, but who one can be. According to LeFrancois (1987), students are not faced with the task of discovering who they are, but rather of developing one of several potential selves. Conflict a student may experience resides in the environment and surroundings that one may be exposed to and that environment may be stressful for students.

This fact is supported by Erikson's (1959) lifespan development stages. He described human development in terms of eight stages. The first five stages span infancy, childhood, and adolescence; the last three describe adulthood. Each of Erikson's (1959) stages involves a basic conflict, brought about primarily by a need to adapt to the social environment. Erikson (1959) labels the stages as follows: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus identity diffusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus self-absorption, and integrity versus despair. According to Erickson (1959), in young adulthood, the identity versus identity diffusion stage is of particular importance. This stage occurs when there is a development of a strong sense of identity--of the ego (self); selecting among various potential selves. This stage supports the notion that college students may experience many stressful events and transitions while in college and to deal with these circumstances, they may turn to self-gifts as a tool for coping.

Similarly, Levinson (1981) suggests that the human lifespan is divided into five ages, each lasting twenty to twenty-five years, although age boundaries overlap somewhat. Levinson (1981) labels the ages as follows: preadulthood (birth-22); early adulthood (17-45); middle adulthood (40-65); late adulthood (60-85); and late late adulthood (80-death). During pre and early adulthood stages, the

development task that becomes predominant involves the separation from the immediate family and the establishment of an independent, adultlike identity. For many of Levinson's (1981) subjects, attending college was a major transitional event. This development task corresponds closely with Erikson's (1959) stage of development labeled identity versus identity diffusion.

The work of both Erikson (1959) and Levinson (1981) support the notion that college students experience stressful events and life transitions. Perhaps these circumstances may motivate college students to purchase gifts for themselves as means of coping with these developmental tasks.

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to focus on college females' clothing gifts for the self according to circumstantial and motivational bases. The following chapter will present a review of research conducted on gifts, the process of gift-giving, and most specifically, on self-gifts.

#### Definition of Terms

The following definitions are relevant to the study:

Gift - A gift refers to a good, service, or experience that is provided to another individual or to oneself.

Gift-giving - The social process or symbolic exchange of gift objects from one individual to another or to oneself.

Self-gift - The purchasing and giving of a gift to one's self; a service; an experience.

Giver/Donor - The individual who purchases and actually gives a gift to another individual or to oneself.

Receiver/Recipient - The individual who receives a gift from the giver/donor.

Occasion - Refers to a favorable time and opportunity; a special time or "event" (Webster's New World Dictionary, 1984); a circumstance.

Motivation - Refers to specific incentives for giving a self-gift, such as, rewarding oneself for passing an exam, or for just "liking me," or as Levy (1982, p. 542) would say, "I owe it to myself."

Context - Refers to either the occasions or circumstances (e.g., birthday), or the motivations (e.g., reward, therapeutic, nice-to-self) for giving a gift.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In past research, the notion of giving gifts to oneself has an appeal that has gone unrecognized by researchers (Mick & DeMoss, 1990a). Recent research has found that today's consumers occasionally purchase gifts for themselves (Mick et al., 1992). Retailers need to understand the nature of self-gifts in relation to the shopping motivations and behaviors of consumers because some personal acquisitions may have dimensions that make them more like gifts than do other personal acquisitions (Mick & DeMoss, 1990a). Because little is known about gift-giving and self-gifts, the purpose of this study was to further explore the phenomenon of self-gifts. This review presents a summary of the literature on the gift-giving process and on self-gifts. But first, the definition of a gift will be briefly discussed.

#### The Gift-Giving Process

Belk (1993) defined gifts as a good or service that is voluntarily provided to another individual through some exchange. Sherry (1983) stated that any object, service, or experience that is frequently context bound, meaning circumstantial or conditional, can be transformed into a gift. The exchange of gifts symbolizes social relationships, which link one individual to another, as well as, gift-giving occasions (Sherry, 1983). We communicate with another through gifts, and we express how we may feel

about another through gifts. According to Shwartz (1967), gifts are a means of socialization that usually serve as a generator of identity; they generate ideas that others may have of us in their minds. Despite the principle which conveys the quality of the gift as a token of social relationship, it is also clear that the manner in which the gift is presented symbolizes the identity of the giver (Shwartz, 1967). Gifts are one of the ways in which individuals (the giver) picture others (the recipient) in their minds. Shwartz (1967) theorized that gifts are frequently given with a reflection of the character of the recipient. In addition, such gifts reveal the idea of how the recipient is perceived in the mind of the giver.

According to Sherry (1983), gift-giving is a form of reciprocity and it is one of the many processes that integrates individuals in a society. Because gift exchange objects are symbolic in nature, gift transactions can be understood as expressive statements that give meaning to the transaction because it becomes the basis by which gifts mediate social meanings (Sherry, 1983).

The significance of gift-giving increases greatly when one considers other forms of giving that are of importance to consumer behavior but are undescribed, such as giving gifts to oneself. Because previous research has emphasized a generalization of the gift-giving process, little effort has been directed either toward understanding the process of gift-giving or toward examining the motivational behavior

underlying the actual exchange of gift objects. In the attempt to distinguish gift-giving from other types of consumer behavior, such as purchase for personal use, assumptions about giving and receiving have remained untested.

### Social-Psychological Aspects of Gift-Giving

One of the first attempts to investigate the gift exchange process from a social-psychological perspective was made by Shwartz (1967). In his study, the gift exchange process was discussed in relation to the development and maintenance of identity (Shwartz, 1967). The acceptance of the gift, as suggested by Shwartz (1967), is an acceptance of the giver's ideas as to what the recipient's desires and needs are. An analysis of the gift-buying patterns of parents would contribute to our knowledge of the gift exchange process as a means for socialization (Shwartz, 1967). For example, if a parent were to buy their son a "masculine" gift, then it would express their image of the child as a "little soldier" (Shwartz, 1967). Shwartz (1967) discussed the dimensions of the gift-giving exchange and emphasized the importance of self-presentation in gift-giving. Shwartz (1967) believed that the gift says to the recipient what the giver thinks of him or her and expresses the degree of the giver's generosity.

Belk (1979) explored the process of gift-giving by identifying four functions of the gift: communication, social exchange, economic exchange, and socialization. Gift-

giving as communication refers to the function of the gift as both a message and a channel for delivering the message to the recipient. Gift-giving functions as social exchange in establishing, defining, and maintaining interpersonal relationships. This paradigm is somewhat broader than communication because it involves not only interpreting the meaning of gift-giving, but it also predicts future behaviors based on these interpretations (Belk, 1979). Gift-giving as economic exchange refers to the obligatory reciprocal exchanges during gift-giving occasions. Gift-giving as socializer deals primarily with self-concept and behavioral patterns. This last paradigm usually influences children more than adults because when a child receives a gift, the child will look to the gift as a powerful means to help them in interpreting who he or she is as well as what they should be like.

Belk (1979) examined these four functions of gift-giving and presented results from two exploratory pieces of field research. Belk's (1979) first study examined 219 gift-giving instances by 73 Philadelphia area residents. The participants provided specific accounts of three gift-giving instances, responded to hypothetical gift-giving situations, described themselves, evaluated the outcomes of the gift-giving instances reported, and characterized the gifts given, respectively.

Belk's (1979) second study investigated the possession and perception of various sex-related toys by preschool

children and their parents. The study selected a sample of toys from Christmas catalogs of two national retail chains. The toys that were selected were represented by mounted pictures, prices, and short descriptions taken from the catalogs. Twenty-two families with children in one of several area nursery school classes were chosen for the study. Each parent was asked whether the child owned a toy, and how well the toy was liked by the child and by the parent.

Both of Belk's studies focused on the communication and socialization functions of the gift-giving process. The results of both studies suggest that gift selections depend upon the following: (a) the giver's ideal self-concept, which deals primarily with the individual's perception of him or herself; (b) the nature of the occasion, which is the event or purpose of giving a gift; and (c) the giver's relation to the recipient, which signified whether they were family, friends, or co-workers.

Sherry (1983) investigated the gift-giving process from an anthropological perspective. Sherry (1983) claimed that the process of gift-giving had three dimensions. First, the social dimension of the giving of gifts can be used to shape and reflect social integration (i.e., membership in a group) or social distance (i.e., relative intimacy of relationships). Second, the personal dimension of gift-giving reflected the perception of the donor and the recipient regarding the identity of self and other. The last

dimension, economic, dealt primarily with the ideology of the gift. This dimension conferred the amount or cost of the gift to be a material benefit on a recipient. Evidence of the price of the gift becomes apparent in this dimension.

Compared to previous gift-giving studies, Sherry's (1983) analysis was more comprehensive. His analysis of each dimension included the interaction of people, the gift itself, and the social environment to approach the gift-giving process in more of a holistic fashion.

Belk and Coon (1993) conducted a study on gift-giving based on dating experiences. They used the economic and social exchange models from Belk (1979) as the paradigms for their study. They introduced and added the romantic love perspective to their study because they thought that the area was neglected in terms of gift-giving. To examine the role of gifts and expenditures in the dating process, they conducted their investigation of such practices and experiences with college students.

They administered a questionnaire and obtained information from the respondents' descriptions of first dates and memorable dating gifts. After administering the questionnaires, an agenda of topics was prepared and respondents were asked to keep a journal which described their dating experiences.

The results of the study indicated that although people see their dating gifts and expenditures as part of an

exchange process in the early dating period, over time, the importance of the exchange diminished.

### **Conceptual Frameworks of Gift-Giving**

Conceptual frameworks on gift-giving have been proposed by Belk (1979), Winakor and Manikowske (1991), Sherry (1983), Horne and Winakor (1991), Sherry, McGrath, and Levy (1992), Belk and Coon (1993).

Horne and Winakor (1991) conceptualized the gift-giving process as having four stages: prepurchase, purchase, presentation, and postpresentation. The prepurchase stage includes the giver's intentions prior to deciding on the gift (Horne & Winakor, 1991). The prepurchase stage constitutes the occasion, the gift itself, the giver and the recipient, interactions among the occasion, recipient, and the gift, the decision of how much to spend on the gift, and the information search for the actual gift selection. The purchase stage consisted of the actual purchase of the gift by the giver. At this stage, the giver decided on which retail outlet from which to purchase the gift, how far they desired to travel, and what method of payment to use when they purchased the gift. During the presentation stage, the giver decided on how to prepare the gift for presentation to the recipient. Finally, the postpresentation stage of the gift-giving process dealt with the consequences of the gift-giving experience, such as, whether or not the recipient likes the gift and how they react upon receiving the gift. Horne and Winakor (1991) applied these stages strictly to

clothing gifts that were purchased new and ready-made from a retail store.

Winakor and Manikowske (1991) proposed that equity, and attribution theories were bases for gift-giving. Winakor and Manikowske (1991) defined equity, for the gift exchange, as the giver's desire to ensure that the conditions for receiving the gift were comparable to the actual giving of the gift. Attribution was depicted as the recipient's inferences about the giver's intentions for giving the gift. This research study explored the application of these theories to the giving and the receiving of clothing gifts.

For the study, approximately 100 male and female undergraduate and graduate students from several colleges at a large university responded to 73 affective items that were used by measuring their responses on a 11-point scale. The male and female responses were examined separately by factor analysis because of the possible differences in affective responses in giving gifts.

Winakor and Manikowske (1991) concluded that the themes expressed were similar between male and female respondents and that equity and attribution theories were applicable to understanding the giving and receiving of clothing gifts.

In an ethnographic study conducted by Sherry, McGrath, and Levy (1992), the symbolic exchange of the gift was investigated through the disposition of the gift, and the consequences of gift returns. These researchers examined customers of two Midwestern gift stores and their gift-giving



activities. The study included direct contact with people and inviting them to speak openly about consumer behaviors. The respondents in the study were chosen from customer mailing lists that were contributed by the two gift stores for the study. The respondents represented two populations which consisted of upscale female gift shoppers, who were from upper-income families, with expensive tastes in gifts. Sherry et al. (1992) found that the disposition and returns of the gift contributed to the notion that the type of gift was the most important component of the gift-giving process.

Previous research on gift-giving has been based on conceptualizations or theoretical frameworks for studying the gift-giving process. Researchers have discussed gift-giving from various disciplines, however, there is still a considerable need to test these theories. Furthermore, the results of previous studies have neither provided a consistent, nor a clear understanding of the gift-giving process. Researchers have also reported that although there have been studies that have explored the many dimensions of gift-giving, the area of giving gifts to oneself still remains unexplored. Therefore, the present research project will attempt to investigate the phenomenon of self-gifts. More specifically, the present study focused on the occasions and motivations that prompted the purchase of self-gifts.

### Self-Gifts: Purchases of Gifts for Oneself

Until recently, no empirical attention has been directed toward self-gifts. As mentioned earlier, the notion of giving to oneself has an appeal that has gone unrecognized by researchers (Mick & DeMoss, 1990a). Research on self-gifts may be a major contribution for retailers to understand and determine their customers' wants and needs in the area of personal acquisitions. In fact, a study conducted by Mick and DeMoss (1990a) revealed that special consumer indulgences, such as gifts to oneself, appear to be an American phenomenon in the 1990's. According to Mick and DeMoss (1990a), a self-gift can be any product, service, or experience that may be purchased as a reward, therapeutic, birthday, or "nice to oneself" gift. Tournier (1966, pp. 5-9) viewed self-gifts as being rewards and incentives for personal accomplishments, as "consolation prizes for personal disappointments or upsets," and as vehicles for holiday celebrations (e.g., birthday, Christmas). Brief discussions of self-gifts have also appeared in sociology (Shwartz, 1967) and consumer research (Levy, 1982; Mick, 1986), these too, in terms of reward, therapeutic, and holiday situations were contexts in which the purchasing of self-gifts were found to occur.

### Occasions that Stimulate Self-Gift Purchases

According to Webster's New World Dictionary (1984), an occasion refers to a favorable time and opportunity; a special time or event. Mick and DeMoss (1990a) examined the

occasions for acquiring self-gifts. Their study consisted of 54 undergraduate business students, from a large American university. A questionnaire was used to collect information from the respondents. Respondents were asked to recall the last time they had acquired a self-gift and to list additional circumstances for self-gift behavior in which they had engaged.

Results of their study revealed common circumstances for purchasing a self-gift. These were accomplishment (e.g., high exam grades), feeling down (e.g., poor performance on an exam, relationship conflicts), holiday (e.g., birthday, Christmas), stressed (e.g., too many demands from school or work) and extra money to spend.

Similar to the previous study, Sherry and McGrath (1989) interviewed gift shop customers to identify reasons or occasions that prompt self-gift purchases. Results of the study confirmed that personal accomplishments, disappointments/depression, and holidays (birthday and Christmas) were prevalent circumstances under which consumers acquired self-gifts.

Mick and DeMoss (1990b) examined the occasions of self-gift experiences in four contexts: reward, therapy, birthday, and extra-money to spend. Although the study examined four self-gift contexts, emphasis was placed on reward (a job well done, passed an exam, or a good deed) and therapeutic (coping with a divorce, the stress often associated with leaving one's hometown to attend school, or depression). The

birthday context fell within the holiday category, and the extra-money circumstance was one of the newer contexts that emerged from prior work of the researchers. Furthermore, Mick and DeMoss (1990b) used all four contexts because their prior work found that the term "self-gift" puzzled some consumers, despite the fact that they admitted to acquisitions that researchers and many other consumers classified as self-gifts.

A self-administered survey instrument was used to capture responses from a broad sample. Three hundred-fifty questionnaires were distributed to individuals in social and civic organizations, a retirement village, and a large university, in a midsize city located in the southeastern United States. The survey was designed to gather information from respondents about how they felt about themselves and about selected behaviors they may have performed as consumers. Respondents were asked to recall and describe in detail the last time they acquired a product, service, or experience for themselves in two of the four contexts: reward, therapy, birthday, and extra-money to spend.

Results of the study indicated that two predominant contexts of self-gifts were reward and therapy. Communication, exchange, and specialness were found to be relevant themes that paralleled the study. According to Mick and DeMoss (1990b), communication represented a function of gift-giving with messages ranging from affection or congratulations to get well or regret. The second dimension,

exchange, dealt primarily with the continuing cycle of reciprocity in which people are obliged to give, receive, and repay. At the individual level, however, reciprocity of self-gifts can also be given because of personal effort and achievement. The last dimension, specialness, represented the fact that giving gifts to oneself are special, even sacred, bringing individuals together through a ritual communion of cultural values and deeply felt emotions. According to their findings, true self-gifts were unquestionably special and distinct from ordinary personal acquisitions.

Extending from other conceptual discussions, the findings of the Mick and DeMoss' (1990b) study suggested that self-gifts are a form of symbolism which referred to special indulgences or giving gifts to oneself that tend to be premeditated and highly context bound. The implication is that the roles and meanings of self-gifts are based on circumstances and conditions, a point frequently emphasized about giving gifts to oneself (Mick & DeMoss, 1990b).

Mick et al. (1992) examined self-gifts in relation to retailing research. Their study focused on women purchasing perfume for their personal use. The method adopted for this study was a specially constructed Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). This method was used particularly for the study because of private and sensitive topics to which direct questions may have provoked affective responses by the informants. A female research assistant approached women who

were shopping alone at the perfume counter of a national department store and appeared to be 20 to 50 years of age. Each of the fifteen informants was shown six drawings that depicted a woman purchasing perfume. Each drawing consisted of a different caption based on one of four contexts: reward, therapeutic, birthday, or nice-to-oneself. The women were then asked to interpret each of the drawings that were shown. The informants were asked to create an imaginary story about each of the drawings.

Mick et. al. (1992) concluded that pre-store factors which referred to personal situations related to significant life transitions, work-related matters, and disrupted interpersonal relationships. These personal situations, may suggest that self-gifts actually help consumers to journey through and signify important life transitions.

### **Motivations for Purchasing Self-Gifts**

Motivation refers to specific incentives for giving a gift, such as, rewarding oneself for passing an exam, or for just "liking me," or as Levy (1982, p, 542) would say, "I owe it to myself."

Mick and DeMoss (1990a) examined the motivations for acquiring a self-gift. They determined that a self-gift could be any product, service, or experience. In their study, respondents were asked to recall the last time they had acquired a self-gift and to list additional motivations for self-gift behavior in which they had engaged.

The common motivational factors found were reward, nice-to-me, cheer-up, fulfill need, celebrate, and to relieve stress. Some of the respondents noted "need" as a motivation for acquiring self-gifts and others mentioned that self-gifts were nonessential. Perhaps if "need" was a probable motivation for a personal acquisition to be a self-gift, it may then, not be considered a gift because there may not be an occasion or an event for the gift. In order for a gift to be considered a gift, it must be highly context bound.

Based on the findings of the study, Mick and DeMoss (1990a) theorized that self-gifts may at times be needed, but they did not conclude "need" as a probable motivation for personal acquisition to be a self-gift. This study explored self-gift experiences and it set the direction for future research.

Through customer interviews, Sherry and McGrath (1989) explored the motivations for acquiring a self-gift at a gift shop. They found that relieving stress after an enduring or impinging event, having extra money to indulge oneself, and just doing something nice for oneself (as in "I like me") were additional contexts cited by the respondents in the study. The researchers concluded that self-gift behavior may be widespread and remains largely undocumented in consumer research.

### Social-Psychological Implications of Clothing Self-Gifts

According to Horne and Winakor (1991), clothing is a

medium of self-expression. Clothing aids in defining and shaping the self. It conveys the wearer's identity, stage in life, and socioeconomic status (Horne & Winakor, 1991).

Because of clothing's closeness to the ego, individual's may readily purchase gifts for themselves to help shape or maintain their identities. Erickson's (1959) lifespan development stage, identity versus identity diffusion, may support clothing as a likely choice for a self-gift because there is a need for the development of a strong sense of identity--of the ego (the self) during this stage.

During college years, women may tend to modify or redefine their identities, and since there is a strong correlation between clothing and the self, women may turn to clothing as self-gifts to aid them in identifying who they are especially during transitional periods in their lives.

### Summary

Although the concept of self-gifts has been mentioned in gift-giving research, further investigation is essential for a better understanding of why and when people purchase self-gifts. The emphasis of the research in this area has been on conceptualizations of self-gifts. Given that so little is known about self-gifts and that they may constitute a sizable share of self-directed consumer behavior, there is a clear need for further empirical research. Apparently, only Mick, DeMoss, and Faber's (1992) self-gift research has focused on female respondents. This would seem to be one uncharted area of self-gifts that is in need of attention



simply because women are usually the "purchasers" for any type of gift object whether it be for another or for themselves. The following chapter outlines the method which was used to accomplish the objectives of this study.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

The purpose of this study was to identify occasions that prompt female college students to purchase clothing as a self-gift and some of their motivations for purchasing clothing as a gift for themselves. The method by which the study was conducted is described under the following headings: predictions, research design, sample, research instrument, data collection, data analyses, and summary.

#### Predictions

The following predictions were developed as a result of the review of literature:

Prediction 1. There are specific occasions (high exam grades, poor exam grades, feeling down, holiday) that prompt female college students to purchase clothing as a self-gift.

Prediction 2. Female college students will have specific motives (reward, therapeutic, or nice-to-self) to purchase clothing as a gift for themselves.

#### Research Design

The purpose of this study was to identify occasions that prompt female college students to purchase a clothing gift for themselves and their motivations for purchasing

clothing as a self-gift. The qualitative data from the respondents were collected through interviews and were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

### Sample

For this study, a purposive, non-probability sample was used. The sample was comprised of 19 female college students from a state university who received partial course credit for their participation. The use of this sample, other than being commonly acceptable for exploratory studies (Mick & DeMoss, 1990a), was chosen for the following reasons: (a) women do most of the shopping in U.S. households (Simonds, 1994), (b) women may have higher interests than men in purchasing self-gifts (Mick, DeMoss, & Faber, 1992), (c) women may be more open than men in revealing personal details about their behaviors (Mick et. al., 1992), (d) women's favorite kinds of gifts are clothing, jewelry, and flowers or plants (Athay, 1993), (e) college students were chosen as a specific sample for this study because they have been found to readily relate to the term "self-gifts" (Mick & DeMoss, 1990a), (f) college students are not faced with the task of discovering who they are, but rather are in the process of developing one of several potential selves (LeFrancois, 1987). As stated earlier in chapter 1, college students tend to search for an identity, not so of who one is, but who one can be, and the environment that they may be exposed to may be an extremely stressful transition for them (LeFrancois, 1987).

## Research Instrument

Because there has been a revitalization of interests in methods relying on qualitative data (Levy, 1986), the instrument that was used for this study to measure the occasions and motivations for purchasing self-gifts was the Self-Gift Thematic Apperception Test (SGTAT) developed by Mick, DeMoss, and Faber (1992). This instrument is a specially adapted Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) based on Murstein's (1963) criteria which was derived from the original TAT developed by Murray (1938).

The Thematic Apperception Test, familiarly known as the TAT, is a method of revealing dominant drives, emotions, sentiments, complexes, and conflicts of personality (Murray, 1938). The special value of this method resides in its power to expose the underlying inhibited tendencies which the subject is not willing to admit, or cannot admit because they are unaware of them.

The approach of this procedure is presenting a series of pictures to a subject and encouraging them to tell stories about the pictures. The stories that are told by the subjects are invented on the spur of the moment. The fact that the stories are collected this way often reveals significant components of personality and is dependent on two factors: (a) the tendency of people to interpret an ambiguous human situation in conformity with their past experiences and present wants, and (b) the tendency to

express their sentiments and needs, whether conscious or unconscious (Murray, 1938).

If the pictures are presented as a test for the imagination, the respondents's interest, together with their need for approval, can be involved in the task. They forget their sensitive self and the necessity of defending themselves against the probings of the examiner (Murray, 1938). Before respondents know it, they have said things about an invented character that applies to themselves, things which they would have been reluctant to confess if they were to respond to a direct question.

According to Mick et al. (1992), TAT's are particularly useful to capture hidden, private, or emotional responses about topics that may otherwise be missed by direct questioning or by any other type of method. TAT's encourage people to feel comfortable and project their experiences onto fictitious characters and circumstances.

Similar to the Mick et al. (1992) study, McGrath, Sherry, and Levy (1992) used projective techniques to capture real-life experiences from their respondents. As part of their instrument design, they used a thematic apperception test to give their respondents the freedom to elaborate on whatever the picture elicited.

### Data Collection

The data collection method involved audio-recorded interviews which lasted for approximately 15-20 minutes. The researcher went to and asked for volunteers in an upper-

division Merchandising Management class and explained the purpose of the study and what was to be expected from the participants. For their participation in the study, the students were given extra course credit. The study took place over a five-day period, with data collection occurring from the mornings until late afternoons. The interviews were held in a room equipped with an audio-recorder and where each student met with the researcher on a one-on-one basis. Before each interview began, the respondents were asked to read and sign an informed consent form which explained the purpose of the study and to inform them that each respondent would be referred to by a number for anonymity purposes (see Appendix B). The respondents were given the opportunity to terminate the session if they felt apprehensive about their participation in the study; none exercised this option.

The respondents were shown four SGTAT stimulus pictures of clothing gifts which were developed based upon Mick et al. (1992) and Murstein's (1963) criteria (see Appendix D). Before the stimulus pictures were shown to the respondents, an introduction of the study which was developed by Murray (1938) was given by the researcher. The introduction was stated as follows:

This is a test of imagination, one form of intelligence. I am going to show you some pictures, one at a time; and your task will be to make up as dramatic a story as you can for each. Tell what has lead up to the event shown in the picture, describe what is happening at the moment, what the characters are feeling and thinking; and then give the outcome. Speak your thoughts as they come

to mind. Do you understand? Here is your first picture. (Murray, 1938, p. 3)

Each stimulus was a black and white, pen and ink drawing of a young woman standing by a counter purchasing a clothing item, with a salesperson nearby (see Appendix D). Each picture filled an eight-and-a-half by eleven inch page and was professionally matted. The pictures were developed by the researcher together with the artist and were varied so as to not seem identical. The titles above the drawings suggested common self-gift contexts based on prior research (Mick et al., 1992; Mick & DeMoss, 1990a). They were:

1. Mary rewards herself with a purchase of a clothing item.
2. Jane cheers herself up with a purchase of a clothing item.
3. Barbara purchases a clothing item for herself on her birthday.
4. Anne purchases a clothing item just to be nice-to-herself.

These four contexts were referred to as reward, therapeutic, birthday, and nice-to-self, respectively. The stimulus pictures were shown to each respondent in the exact same order. This technique allowed the researcher to capture personal insights about the reasons why female college students purchase self-gifts and what actually prompts them to do so.

In order to describe the sample and to ensure that the respondents were within the age range (18-24 years) of

college students, demographic characteristics of the respondents were also collected (see Appendix C). In addition, respondents were asked to answer three fashion-specific lifestyle statements in order for the researcher to measure their fashion involvement levels (see Appendix C).

According to Fairhurst, Good, and Gentry (1989), the purchase of clothing items is classified as a high involvement activity. For the present study, three fashion-specific lifestyle variables were adopted due to their application to apparel. Two fashion-specific statements (I like to go to stores to see what is new; I like to shop for clothes) and one fashion-consciousness statement (I read fashion magazines) were asked. The respondents answered to the statements by indicating whether they always, sometimes, or never participated in the lifestyle variables.

Because fashion research (Fairhurst et al., 1989) has shown that the construct of involvement is relevant to women's apparel, the statements that the respondents were asked to answer were added in order to understand and measure their involvement when purchasing a clothing item for themselves. Given the importance of shopping to the selection of apparel, one would also expect the strength of one's beliefs about stores to vary directly with apparel involvement (Fairhurst et al., 1989).



### Data Analyses

The data from the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and coding was performed by reporting the occasions and motivations in the self-gift stories and the type of stories the respondents narrated. The unit of analysis for coding the data was done through the identification of phrases that were mentioned within the stories. For prediction 1, potential occasions (e.g., life-transitions, work-related and school-related matters, and disrupted interpersonal relationships) were developed based on prior discussions of self-gift experiences by Mick et al. (1992). For prediction 2, potential motivations emerged based on three of the four self-gift contexts that were used for this study. They were: reward, therapeutic, and nice-to-self.

### Summary

The research questions under investigation were: What occasions prompt female college students to purchase clothing as a self-gift? What are some of the motivations female college students experience in order to purchase a clothing gift for themselves? The Self-Gift Thematic Apperception Test adopted by Mick et al. (1992) from Murray's (1938) original Thematic Apperception Test was used as the research instrument. A purposive, non-probability sample of 19 female college students from a state university was used. The data collection method involved audio-recorded in-depth interviews

with the respondents and the data were then transcribed by the researcher for analysis.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, a profile of the sample, including their degree of fashion involvement, the themes that emerged from the study, and an analysis of the occasions and motivations of self-gift experiences are presented.

#### Sample Profile

The sample consisted of 19 female college students. The mean age of the respondents was 21.2 years with the range from 20-23 years.

As for academic major distribution, fourteen of the respondents were Merchandising Management majors, constituting 78% of the sample. There were three Apparel Design majors, constituting 17% of the sample and one respondent who was a double major in both Merchandising Management and Apparel Design.

In regard to marital status, all the respondents indicated being single which may reflect a common characteristic of the sample population (college students).

In regard to fashion-consciousness, 33% of the respondents reported that they frequently read fashion magazines, whereas 67% indicated they sometimes read fashion magazines. As for the fashion-specific statements, 50% of the respondents indicated always liking to go to the stores to see what is new, whereas 44% mentioned only liking it sometimes, and 6% reported never liking to go to the store to

see what is new. In regard to liking to shop for clothes, 72% always liked to shop for clothes, whereas 28% reported only liking to shop for clothes sometimes. As the researcher expected, the fashion-specific lifestyle percentages of the respondents indicated high involvement levels.

### Content Analysis

Content analytical procedures were performed by coding the occasions and motivations in the stories that were reported by the respondents. The unit of analysis for coding the data was done through the identification of phrases that were mentioned within the stories. Seventy-two usable Self-Gift Thematic Apperception Test stories were produced (18 respondents by 4 self-gift contexts). One respondent failed to comprehend the story-telling task and provided irrelevant remarks.

Results of this study showed that personal situations, which related to significant life-transitions, work and school related matters, and interpersonal relationship conflicts are strong occasions that prompted the purchase of self-gifts. In addition, although the captions used with the stimulus pictures were found to be common self-gift contexts in previous research, results of the present study showed that reward, therapeutic, and nice-to-self are also common motivations for purchasing gifts for oneself.

## Interpretive Analysis of Self-Gift Experiences

The following results are descriptive and interpretive insights on the nature and depth of the occasions and the motivations of self-gift experiences. The categorization of the themes that emerged from the study were adapted from the study conducted by Mick et al. (1992). However, the one category that did emerge from this study and was an addition to the other themes was school-related matters. This may be due to the fact that the sample was comprised of female college students.

### Personal Situations

The first of these occasions is referred to as **liminal states**, which can be defined as threshold conditions when individuals are between two statuses, often during significant transition periods in their lives (Mick et al., 1992; Belk et al., 1989). This condition appeared in 15 stories, some of which were academically related and the main motivation was therapeutic, as this excerpt indicates:

Jane is a Freshman in College and she really hates it. She's having a really hard time with school. She went down to Eugene and found all these sales, and thought she was doing great. She's relieved and feels a lot better. (21, therapeutic)<sup>1</sup>

Liminal states related to careers were evident and the core motivation was therapeutic, as this verbatim shows:

Jane is feeling down about her job and she doesn't feel very important. If she buys this

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<sup>1</sup>The notation refers to the informant's age and the context from which the story was derived.

item, it's going to make her feel more important. She'll then feel better about herself. (21, therapeutic)

Positive liminal states were also evident with rewarding oneself as the main motivation for purchasing a clothing item. These stories were equally intriguing, as these excerpts indicate:

Mary used to be overweight. She lost a lot of weight, so she decided to go to the store and wanted to reward herself with something really nice and expensive because she lost all that weight. She thinks she deserves it and right now she's explaining her story to the saleslady... maybe she's telling her that she used to be overweight and she would like to buy some clothes. This way, she's rewarding herself for all the weight she's always wanted to lose and at the same time, feel better about herself. (22, reward)

Mary just lost ten pounds. She's rewarding herself by buying something. It looked nice on her. It made her happy. Going to the store, the atmosphere, all the people that were there, the different things and new things going on, made her not think about her being overweight before. Her new item and her new look made her happy... that's all the reward she needs. (21, reward)

According to Mick and DeMoss (1990a), these stories demonstrate that self-gifts serve to mold and sustain self-concepts as well as self-esteem. Improving self-esteem through weightloss, offers insights regarding the relationship between self-gifts and self-concept, as well as the symbolic nature of clothing. However, these stories also reveal that the experience that is received from the self-gift can go beyond these functions. The stories with liminal states actually help individuals journey through significant life passages.

**Work-related matters** were another factor for personal situations the respondents mentioned. Fourteen stories included references to job conditions and careers. Most of the work-related references were made in either reward or therapeutic contexts, which makes sense since the casual link between work and material benefits is a strong ideology in American culture (Mick & DeMoss, 1990a). According to one reward story:

Mary got a promotion because she's very dedicated to her job. Everyone she's around knows she's doing really well in her job. So she decided to go out to the mall and buy herself a new outfit. Buying a new outfit will totally reward herself for a job well done. (21, reward)

The main character was described as exerting much energy and now deserves a gift. Mick and DeMoss (1990b) observed this same reasoning in survey descriptions of reward self-gifts. They called it the exchange dimension of self-gifts in which personal endeavor and accomplishment are traded for the justified right to consumption indulgence.

Work-related matters also appeared in some therapeutic stories. Motivations for purchasing self-gifts were occasionally used to cheer-up oneself because of a disappointment in the workplace, as this one story indicates:

Jane is a hard worker but just got fired from her job for no reason at all. She's saying, "It really wasn't my fault. It happened." So, she goes down to the mall and into her favorite store where she knows she can find something to make her feel better. She purchases a new outfit and she's glad she bought it because she feels a whole lot better about the situation she's in and about herself. She's better now. (21, therapeutic)

According to Mick et al. (1992), on the surface, stories with work-related matters support the fact that women have entered the workplace in increasing numbers. It seems as if the stories suggest that women are integrating their career concerns with their buying behaviors.

A third factor of personal situations that were mentioned in the stories involved **school-related matters**. Because the respondents for this study were college students, over half of the stories mentioned school-related matters. These stories were intended to reward oneself for receiving a good grade or for achieving an academic goal, to cheer-up for doing poor on an exam, or just to relieve stress from school in general. As these excerpts indicate:

Jane had a really hard week at school. She decided she needed cheering up. Besides, she wanted to get away from school to make herself feel better. She really likes shopping. She most especially likes shopping for clothes. She goes out to the mall and finds a really nice outfit. She buys it and thinks it's the right outfit for her. Buying this outfit has made Jane feel so much better inside, because how she looks on the outside is a reflection of how she feels inside. If she dresses up and feels really good about herself, it makes her feel better inside.  
(22, therapeutic)

Mary got a good grade on a final. She's pleased with herself and told herself that, "If I do really well in this class, I'll go out and buy something for myself." So, she does well in this class and does go out and buys something real nice to reward herself for an awesome job. She feels good about her grade, about her new outfit, and about herself.  
(21, reward)

Jane had a really bad day on campus and needs to escape. Shopping for her is a way of escaping and it cheers her up because she likes buying clothes and things like that. She goes out and goes to the stores. She goes in one and she's



found something for herself at the store that'll make her feel so much better. She purchases it and she's feeling better already. (22, therapeutic)

Mary did really well in school this term. She made it a goal to get above a 3.0 and she did. She was building up a purchase for an outfit that she had seen at the store. She really, really wanted it, but it was kind of expensive. So, she thought she would give herself a goal, so she can purchase the outfit as a reward. She obtained her goal and got a 3.0 and so she bought the outfit she really wanted. That was her reward. (21, reward)

The last factor for personal situations is **interpersonal relationships**. The 16 stories that mentioned relationships appeared primarily in therapeutic contexts. Most of these incorporated relationships with men. Interestingly, the core motivation for these self-gifts was to cheer-oneself-up through enhancing the appearance or restoring self-esteem of the main character for the other. According to these stories:

Jane and her boyfriend just broke up. She's feeling really bad and ugly. She looks to clothes and appearance as a way of feeling more secure about herself, which may be totally bad, but that's what she likes to do. Since she's not feeling good about herself, she's putting a lot of stress on that and looks to clothing as a big part of appearance. She decided to buy herself something to make herself feel better and to forget about the situation. She purchases the perfect outfit at her favorite store and although she'll have a difficult time dealing with the break-up, she'll at least feel better about herself at that moment. (21, therapeutic)

Jane's boyfriend just broke up with her. She's really upset and buys a great outfit to make herself feel better. She looks perfect in it. She just remembers that tonight there's a party at a friend's house. She knows he'll be there. So, it's another motivation for her to buy the outfit. She leaves the store thinking that she bought this great outfit and she wants to see if

her boyfriend will be at the party to see her in it and to make him realize he lost something good. (21, therapeutic)

Jane was feeling kind of depressed because her boyfriend just dumped her. She wasn't feeling too hot and was depressed and everything and so she went shopping because she likes to go shopping. It makes her feel better and it gets her mind off things. She was looking around, and saw this outfit, and said, "Wow, this is really pretty." She liked the colors and everything and went to try it on and felt so good with it on because it looked so nice. She went ahead and bought it. It made her feel really good. That's how she cheered herself up was buying that outfit. It made her self-esteem go up and felt good about herself by buying that outfit. (21, therapeutic)

In such cases, the self-gift experience is an attempt to provide for oneself what cannot be obtained interpersonally. The self-gift experience becomes more emotional, since the individual is looking for respect, affection, and sometimes acceptance from another. These factors are probably subconscious motivations, but play an extremely important role when deciding to purchase a clothing item.

### Affective Situations

Thirty-six stories indicated the affective outcome of the self-gift experience. The stories mentioned positive emotions; e.g., feeling better, feeling good about oneself, relieved, prettier, etc. These positive emotions were additional motivations for purchasing clothing as self-gifts. In two specific cases the main character feels "perfect in this perfect outfit" that she purchased, and she's "excited about her new look." In eight cases, other people in the main character's life (e.g., boyfriend, friends, or co-

workers) were also mentioned as reacting positively to the clothing item purchased. As these excerpt indicates:

Ann just bought a new piece of clothing. She's excited to wear it for the first time. She obviously likes it a lot and is going to feel good when she wears it. She wanted to be nice to herself because all the clothes in her closet didn't really make her feel good anymore. So that new piece of clothing she got will make her look good, and besides, friends are already telling her that she does look good. (21, nice-to-self)

It's Barbara's 21st birthday and it's her "night on the town," so she wanted to look really good for herself and her boyfriend. She went shopping for the perfect outfit. She found it and she got it, just to look good for her birthday. (21, birthday)

The affective outcome was negative in only three stories and was not mentioned in the other remaining stories. As this excerpt indicates:

Jane always stresses out about shopping because a lot of the clothes she likes can't seem to fit her and her mom maybe constantly reminds her about this problem. Because of this, she usually watches t.v. or relaxes, but she wanted to try and buy something nice for herself, just to feel better. (22, therapeutic)

These data reconfirm Mick and DeMoss's (1990a) findings that self-gifts tend to produce more positive feelings over negative.

### **Additional Factors**

In two stories the character purchased other products or services in addition to a clothing item (an entire outfit, shoes, accessories, make-up, and a visit with a hairstylist). In one case, Ann purchased an outfit, found matching shoes, and accessories to top off her look (21, nice-to-self).

Also, based on data from this study, the situations surrounding birthday self-gifts appear to have mixed emotions. For most of the characters, purchasing a clothing item as a birthday gift was not as important as the other situations that were previously mentioned. In fact, most of the characters did not use the fact that it was a birthday to purchase a clothing item for themselves; instead, the characters purchased a clothing item from gift certificates or monetary gifts that were given to them from others (e.g., family and friends). There were only three stories that mentioned that the main character would purchase clothing as a gift on her birthday. However, these stories reported celebrating a special occasion, not necessarily birthday (e.g., Christmas, New Year's). It seems as if the only motivation for purchasing clothing was because the characters knew they would be celebrating with friends by going out to dinner and dancing afterward. Also, a few birthday self-gifts were purchased because the character had no friends (21, birthday), everyone forgot her birthday (22, birthday), or no one gave her the gift she asked for (21, birthday). These data show that the motivations and experiences of birthday self-gifts are complex and may require further research.

### Summary

The descriptive and interpretive analysis of this study revealed that the predictions that were mentioned earlier in chapter 3 correlated with the results of this study. The

occasions that prompted the purchase of self-gifts dealt primarily with personal situations, such as life transitions, work and school related matters, and disrupted interpersonal relationships.

The female college respondents found that rewarding themselves with a self-gift, cheering themselves up with a self-gift, and being nice-to-oneself with a self-gift were dominant motivations for a certain occasion (e.g., work or school related matter, conflicts with interpersonal relationships, etc.). These findings indicated that the respondents identified a specific occasion and used self-gifts to cope with their situation.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the present study was to identify occasions that prompt female college students to purchase clothing as a self-gift and some of their motivations for purchasing clothing as a gift for themselves.

Mick, DeMoss, and Faber's (1992) Self-Gift Thematic Apperception Test was used to study female college students' occasions and motivations for purchasing self-gifts. The data collection method involved one-on-one, audio-recorded interviews which lasted for approximately 15-20 minutes. A purposive, non-probability sample of 19 female college students from a state university was used for this study. Content analysis and interpretive analytic procedures were used to analyze the results.

The female college respondents found that rewarding themselves with a self-gift, cheering themselves up with a self-gift, and being nice to oneself with a self-gift were dominant motivations for a certain occasion (e.g., work or school related matter, conflicts with interpersonal relationships, etc.). These findings indicate that the respondents identified a specific occasion and used self-gifts to cope with the situation.

### Implications

The present study contributes insights regarding the occasions and motivations for self-gifts. However,

generalizing the present findings to other populations cannot be made. Additional descriptive research is needed across a broader sample.

Results from the present study indicate that personal situations related to significant life transitions, work and school related matters, and disrupted interpersonal relationships are strong occasions for female college students' self-gift behavior. These personal situations established motivational factors (rewarding oneself, cheering-oneself-up, and being nice-to-oneself) to prompt the purchase of self-gifts. These findings are similar to those of a prior study conducted by Mick et al. (1992).

As stated in chapter 1, Shwartz (1967) suggested that gifts to oneself are nutrients for a person's emotions when he/she is without affectional ties. The results of this study, where interpersonal relationships are concerned, corresponds with Shwartz's (1967) conclusion about self-gifts. Many of the stories mentioned disrupted relationships with men. The core motivation for these self-gifts was to enhance the appearance or to restore the self-esteem of the female character. In addition, purchasing a birthday gift for oneself also supports Shwartz's (1967) conclusion about self-gifts. Some stories indicated that birthday self-gifts were purchased because others (e.g., family, friends) forgot about the female character's birthday or she had no friends.

In addition, the results of this study, where life transitions were concerned, support Erickson's (1959) and

Levinson's (1981) notion that college students experience stressful events and life transitions. Attending college and having to deal with the stress motivated the respondents to purchase gifts for themselves as means of coping with these developmental tasks. For instance, many stories indicated that the female character had a difficult time with school, and purchasing a self-gift made her feel relieved and a lot better about her situation.

In regard to clothing as a medium of self-expression, results of the study indicate that clothing's closeness to the ego is apparent. Horne and Winakor (1991) concluded that clothing aids in defining and shaping the self. During significant life transitions, such as school-related matters, respondents indicated that clothing not only made them feel and look better, it made them feel more important. Also, results of the study indicated affective outcomes of the self-gift experience. The stories mentioned positive emotions when purchasing a clothing item, such as, feeling good about oneself and feeling prettier. These results support Mick and DeMoss's (1990a) findings that self-gifts tend to produce more positive feelings about the self than negative.

Furthermore, in this study self-gifts were also found to be somewhat differentiated from other personal acquisitions by their occasional and motivational contexts. These results support Mick and DeMoss's (1990a) theory that self-gifts may be needed, but they did not conclude "need" as a probable



motivation for personal acquisitions to be considered a self-gift. Some respondents mentioned that "need" was a motivation for the main characters in the stories to purchase a self-gift, while some respondents looked at self-gifts as "extras." Self-gifts may at times be needed (e.g., a new blouse to coordinate with pants that the individual may already have), but need being strictly a motivation is probably not a sufficient motivation for a personal acquisition to be considered a self-gift.

A related issue concerns the term "self-gift" that may be defined differently by individuals. One respondent commented that the main character of the story may be an impulse buyer and may not consider her purchase a self-gift because she participates in this shopping behavior too much. To this respondent, the definition of a self-gift is something that cannot be purchased at anytime; rather it is something unique and rare. Another respondent mentioned that all purchases that are not considered necessities are self-gifts. From this, future research on self-gifts should be cautious as to how the term "self-gift" is used. The meaning or possibly clarification of the definition may need to be identified for the respondents, so they may have a better understanding of the term "self-gifts."

Lastly, the results of this study indicate that retailers need to understand the nature of self-gifts in relation to the shopping motivations and behaviors of consumers because some personal acquisitions may have

dimensions that make them more like gifts than other personal acquisitions. With this in mind, store advertising, in-store displays, and point-of-purchase displays are among the most obvious marketing tools to which the results of this study apply. Themes that emerged from the study emphasized important factors female college students, as a specific consumer segment, often experience. Reward and therapeutic gifts are of special importance, and retailers could stress future benefits of purchasing a clothing item. The customer may remember or re-experience these feelings and events through the subsequent use of the product.

### Conclusions

Two research questions were answered when the present study was completed: 1.) What occasions prompt female college students to purchase clothing as a self-gift? 2.) What are some of the motivations female college students experience in order to purchase clothing as a gift for themselves? Within this context, the notion of self-gifts was found to be a comprehensible concept. In fact, the purchasing of a gift for the self was a common behavior that most of the respondents could relate to and from their story-telling, have practiced. For most of the respondents, a self-gift was acquired primarily within a select set of occasional and motivational factors.

Very little empirical research has been conducted on self-gifts and as a result, the findings of present investigation provided insight as to how female college

students may relate to self-gifts and what occasions and motivations prompt them to purchase clothing as a gift for themselves. Academically, this study has contributed to the body of literature on self-gifts in relation to specific occasions and motivations, in addition to previous investigations regarding these two factors.

### Limitations

Before making recommendations, limitations of this study should be discussed. Owing to the time and financial constraint of the researcher, the sample used for this study was a purposive, non-probability sample. Given that this study focused exclusively on female respondents from a specific age and lifestyle segment, the results cannot be generalized to other consumer segments of the population.

The single product class used for this study was a clothing item. Because clothing tends to be ego involving and highly symbolic, the results of the present study may not be transferable to other product types.

This study involved female college students that participated in a projective technique, a TAT. From this approach, the researcher was able to gather some intriguing insights about self-gift experiences which were relevant to a specific target group (women, 20-23 years of age). Further development and modification of this approach may be needed, including application to other product classes (e.g., jewelry) and/or other consumer segments (e.g., men).

The respondents were asked about their fashion involvement when purchasing a clothing item, the high percentages that resulted indicated that the respondents were highly fashion involved. Also, the similarities they may have in terms of fashion involvement may be interpreted as group commonalities since the sample comprised all female college students who were enrolled in an upper division Merchandising Management class. The respondents' academic majors relate to apparel or related fields and may be an indication of their high interest in fashion, but more specifically, fashion clothing.

The research instrument used for this study involved a Self-Gift Thematic Apperception Test adopted from a study conducted by Mick et al. (1992). The themes that emerged from their study were also adopted as the occasional and motivational categories for this study. Further qualitative data is needed to capture new occasional and motivational bases for purchasing self-gifts in order to contribute to the body of knowledge and to enrich the field of self-gift experiences.

Given that only one coder analyzed the data that emerged from the study, the reliability of the results is limited. If there were more than one coder, then the results of the study may have been categorized or interpreted differently.

Lastly, the notion that the respondents narrated stories about a certain shopping behavior is important for retailers to consider. The results of this study open up avenues for

managerial implications in relation to customer service. For example, retail advertising, in-store displays, point-of-purchase displays, and sales assistance are among the most obvious marketing tools retailers could address and to which the results of the study apply. Furthermore, communication between sales associate and customer could be enhanced by ensuring that the sales associate has product knowledge of the items that are carried by the store and that the sales associate is aware of the customer's needs.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of the present study, the following recommendations for future research are proposed.

1. Replication of the present study,
  - a. refining the method, such as collecting quantitative data instead of conducting interviews on an individual basis.
  - b. using a larger sample, another consumer segment of the population, or other consumers from a different age category.
2. The use of focus groups may provide a fruitful means of collecting data. Focus groups may be a means of identifying people's needs and wants across a broad spectrum, and new insights on self-gift experiences may emerge through the use of this method.
3. More qualitative research is needed in relation to self-gifts, such as further identifying

distinctions between self-gifts and personal acquisitions (e.g., distinguishing between the terms "need" and "self-gift").

4. The relationship between self-gifts and self-concept is especially worthy of future research. For example, some respondents indicated that clothing as self-gifts makes an individual feel better about themselves and that it improves their self-esteem especially if a major goal for them was to lose weight.
5. The frequency of self-gift purchases needs to be addressed. This may help in understanding the difference between an individual who purchases a few gifts for themselves and thinks of these as having special value, versus those who engage in excessive buying.
6. The differences in self-gift behavior in relation to cultural influences appears to be worthy of future research. This may help consumer researchers understand the behaviors of the different consumer markets and the influence their culture may have on their shopping behaviors.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL



OREGON  
STATE  
UNIVERSITY

312 Administrative Services  
Corvallis, Oregon  
97331-2140

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scanlanr@ccmail.ors.edu

February 24, 1995

Principal Investigator:

The following project has been approved for exemption under the guidelines of Oregon State University's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services:

Principal Investigator: Cheryl L. Jordan

Student's Name (if any): Marie Abigail V. Cristi

Department: AIHM

Source of Funding:

Project Title: Self-Gifts: Consumer Purchases of Clothing Gifts for Themselves

Comments:

A copy of this information will be provided to the Chair of the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. If questions arise, you may be contacted further.

Sincerely,  
Redacted for privacy

Mary E. Nunn  
Sponsored Programs Officer

cc: CPHS Chair

APPENDIX B  
PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND INFORMED CONSENT

Principal Investigator: Cheryl L. Jordan, Ph.D.

Student Researcher: Marie Abigail Cristi

You are being asked to participate in a study that deals with self-gifts; why and when consumers may purchase clothing gifts for themselves. Participation in the study will consist of an interview that may last for approximately 45 minutes which will be conducted by the researcher.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask the researcher before the interviewing process begins. The study will involve an audiorecording of your own thoughts; there will be no right or wrong answers. Your name will not be associated with the information you give and your recorded responses will be erased once the study is completed. You have the opportunity to terminate the session if you feel apprehensive about your participation in this study. The activity should prove interesting and we appreciate your cooperation.

I voluntarily agree to participate in the proposed activity identified and explained above.

Name (Print)

Signature

Date

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APPENDIX C  
PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS QUESTIONNAIRE

### DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The following questions are designed to help us interpret our findings accurately. We would appreciate your answers.

1. How old were you on your last birthday?

\_\_\_\_\_ YEARS

2. What is your current major?

\_\_\_\_\_ MAJOR

3. What is your present marital status?

1. SINGLE, NEVER MARRIED
2. MARRIED
3. DIVORCED/SEPARATED
4. WIDOWED

The next set of questions will help us understand and measure your fashion involvement. We would appreciate your answers.

1. I read fashion magazines (i.e., Glamour, Mademoiselle, Elle, Vogue).

1. ALWAYS
2. SOMETIMES
3. NEVER
4. OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

2. I like to go to stores to see what is new.

1. ALWAYS
2. SOMETIMES
3. NEVER
4. OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

3. I like to shop for clothes.

1. ALWAYS
2. SOMETIMES
3. NEVER
4. OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

SELF-GIFT THEMATIC APPERCEPTION TEST  
STIMULUS DRAWINGS



## SELF-GIFT CONTEXT: REWARD

Mary rewards herself with a purchase of a clothing item.



## SELF-GIFT CONTEXT: THERAPEUTIC

Jane cheers herself up with a purchase of a clothing item.



## SELF-GIFT CONTEXT: BIRTHDAY

Barbara purchases a clothing item for herself on her birthday.



## SELF-GIFT CONTEXT: NICE-TO-SELF

Anne purchases a clothing item just to be nice-to-herself.

